3 Questions for My Readers (and the story behind why I'm asking)

written by Holly
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Survey is now closed.

This is going to sound pretty strange, but I have recently discovered that **I have no clue what it is about my fiction that readers like…**

And I'm a lot less certain I understand what kind of fiction I write than I was up until yesterday.

Here's where I discovered how little I actually know about my own fiction. My daughter and I did a podcast episode on Writing to Market VS. Selling Out, in which I humorously described how I have managed to spend a thirty-plus year writing career (so far) not realizing I was a genre contrarian, and that being a genre contrarian was making it really difficult for me to connect with my readers.

Followed by the discussion in the private podcast forum… (If you're interested, create a free account, then go here… Episode 37: Writing to Market VS Selling Out – Discussion)… in which one reader mentioned that she didn't read a lot of my books because she had a hard time with the horror.

Here's the quote (with her name redacted) and my posted response:

=====

MEMBER said: Personally there are many of Holly's books I don't read because I don't read Horror.

> ***MY reply to her:*** *Here's the thing that stopped me cold in reading your post.*
>
> *I thought,* ***"I've never written horror…"***
>
> *Followed by thinking through what's in my Cadence Drake novels – genetically engineered vampires and the piles of dead with which they decorated their spaceships. And thought… Oh. I just thought of it as* ***kind of dark science fiction,*** *though certainly not the darkest I've ever read.*
>
> *And then thought, How did I miss the fact that my first SF novel has horror in it…*
>
> ***And then I remembered where I got my worldview.***
>
> *Going hunting and fishing with my father from the time I was six, helping my father clean our kills, helping my mother cook them, enjoying eating them. I am not squeamish, a fact that served me well in my first career as a nurse.*
>
> *Alaska in the children's home when I was nine, where one boy ran away, fleeing out onto the tundra. He was never found. In the part of Alaska where we lived, the population density was about .0001 people per square mile. There were thousands of*

square miles of uninhabited tundra in all directions from us, rivers and lakes and sinkholes.

Being grabbed from behind and felt up by a perv at a Costa Rican bus stop when I was late-fourteen, turning and attacking him – in six-inch platform high heels with my umbrella held like a sword, filled with crazy blood rage, chasing him with the absolute intent of killing him when I caught him – with zero chance of catching him.

Guatemala in 1975/76 during its civil war, seeing boys my age (I was fifteen when we lived there) being marched into the back of a truck at gunpoint – the method by which the Guatemalan army conscripted soldiers. Round them up, shove them into a truck, shoot the ones who try to escape. (I did not see anyone get shot the day I was watching that truck, those soldiers, and those kids, and trying to understand what was going on.)

Guatemala again, walking with my family past the ruins of a magnificent old cathedral near the mission where we lived. It had collapsed in an earthquake maybe a hundred years earlier. The front was decorated with a long line of head-high freshly blood-stained bullet holes.

The emergency room where I walked in to work one morning and found both of our code rooms stacked with bodies after a drunk who'd been driving all his MANY friends home in the back of his pickup truck hit a tree at – best guess from the sheriff – eighty miles an hour.

Two young kids – 8 and 10 years old – who we coded for over an hour after a tragic accident that had happened while they were playing outside. Neither survived. They were their divorced parents' only children.

And a long, long list of other real-life horrors and tragedies in Alaska, Costa Rica, Guatemala as a kid, and then in the ER, in the ICU, in Med-Surg.

And then even when I was writing full-time, discovering by returning some of my mother's things to her house (about a mile from mine) after a falling out that my parents and sister no longer lived there… that they had moved away without saying goodbye or telling us they were going, or even where they were going. And having my then-nine-year-old kid try to kill himself because he thought the shitty thing they did was his fault….

And. And. And. There's so much more. But here's my point…

I see ***horror*** *as "supernatural clowns pulling kids down gutter drains, and haunted cars eating people."*

In my mind, I never wrote a word of horror. *I just translated what I'd seen in the real world into realistic but well-disguised background for my fiction. And even when Becky and I were doing this episode, I did not include horror in my description of what I'd written in Hunting the Corrigan's Blood, because I didn't think it had any horror in it.*

And now I'm wondering if any of my other books have horror in them.

None of us see the world the same way, and my default setting is a combination of "Survive to Operate" and "don't look away, don't excuse, and don't forget." My world view is broad, real-world, and dark.

Nonetheless, I bounce out of bed every morning thrilled to be alive because I get to write fiction and nonfiction, get to be with my guys, get to talk to my other kids (a lot of days, anyway), get to play with my goofy cat…

And the odds of me having to do CPR on someone or intubate someone or watch someone I fought like hell to save die anyway, or live through my own or anyone else's real-world horror are – on any given day – pretty low. Especially compared to what those odds used to be.

But from the responses to this episode, I have discovered that I do not understand my own fiction or its contents as well as I thought I did. *So I'm going to be sending out a tiny questionnaire to the readers on my list, asking them to show me what they love about my fiction, and why, and what they hate (or avoid), and why.*

I need to see how people who consider themselves my readers interpret what I do – because none of us see the world the

same way, and I'm guessing the way I see it is pretty strange even for a science fiction/fantasy/suspense writer. (And accidental committer of horror.)

===== So… reader of mine…

If you're still reading, here's what I would greatly appreciate from you: The answers (in as much detail as you wish to give) to three questions.

Just cut and paste the following questions into a **REPLY to this post,** and tell me…

———

- What do you specifically love about what you find in my fiction, and why – and what genre(s) would you call the parts you like?
- What do you try to avoid in my fiction, and why – and what genre(s) would you call the parts you avoid?
- What ONE other writer do you read who gives you what you love most about my fiction without giving you what you try to avoid in my fiction? (With a link to your favorite book by that reader if you're willing to recommend him or her.)

———

I've got some studying, and thinking, and rethinking to do, and if you're willing to help me figure out what I need to do to make my fiction better for YOU, I'm grateful. If you got this far, thank you for reading this very long email. **And if you're willing to answer those three questions for me,** I'll use the email linked to your reply to send you a personal download link to a story of mine that fits what you like and avoids what you hate.

With the acknowledgement that in some cases, *I might have to write that story first. So you may not get your link*

immediately.

Holly

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